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DISPERSALS

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DISPERSALS



How hard can it be to find a huge outpost of 20th century technological sublime in the middle of flat rural countryside? Harder than you might think. Paul Brickhill's 'plucky-brit-grin' biography of Douglas Bader relates his first arrival as a disorienting plunge into a late-night labyrinth of narrow lanes, rustic dead-ends and huge hedges, culminating in a blanking at the guardhouse. The name doesn't help; the village of Coltishall is by no means the nearest. The heroic name most associated with the place- Bader- didn't stay long.

Working near Aylsham in 2004, I first became aware of RAF Coltishall through the waves of jet sound which filled the air. They awakened my awareness of linkages between country houses (of the kind where relaxed arts residencies might happen), feudal landholding patterns, and the vast network of entropic airfields which carpeted Norfolk and Lincolnshire. A couple of years later, I was on the airfield as part of a group of artists, archaeologists and site specialists from English Heritage. The Jaguar, the final aircraft flying from the base, was glaringly obsolete, and the airfield could not be modified for new generations of fighters. We were given access to the site throughout its closure, which took 3 years. The ageing jets were incontinent and increasingly unreliable. Everything was surprisingly un-secret. The biggest surprise was the sense of emotional recognition as I walked through the hangars and workshops, across the runway ends, and into the dispersals areas. A thousand Saturday afternoon films and 1970s albums supplied soundtracks, from stirring war epics to the paranoid doomsday of Hawkwind's 'Brainstorm.'

Once past gatehouse formalities, a rational world opened before the invited visitor: as an Expansion Era airbase, designed by Archibald Bulloch with aesthetic advice on look and layout from Edwin Lutyens, visiting aircrew and personnel would immediately feel oriented and at home, as the same design and layout of airbase spread across the country. Neo-Georgian accommodation, mess facilities and briefing rooms harmonised with utilitarian technical structures- the hangars, workshops and stores. Postwar runway extensions, concreting and the diffusion of weapons stores to house the unpredictably volatile Firestreak and RedTop missile systems did little to change the sense of settled order.

What of the uninvited visitor? With its proximity to the North Sea coast, Coltishall was especially vulnerable during the WW2 period, a rhizomatic series of dispersal blast walls evolved, handy for the quick response to any views of multiple targets. Rational spaces, inviting as targets, were rendered confusing and inhospitable, with attenuators to lower the ground vibration and sound. As the military threat receded after the war, the walls began to decay. Ivy began its inexorable creep.



vulnerable to low-level high speed raiders. From smaller circles of sandbags and small huts during
aprons at each end of the runway. Angled to protect from bomb, fire and shrapnel, they broke
momentary. In time, the dispersals area nearest to the hangars was kitted out as an engine test
the end of the Cold War, these structures took on a more beatific profile, suggesting Neolithic





Since the 1960s, RAF bases like Coltishall have been experienced as a species of media dream theatre. Toytown psychedelic entertainments such as the Avengers and The Prisoner, built around a neutered pop art vision, deployed plots and mise-en-scène in which inhabitants and personnel are hypnotically or somnambulistically ‘not themselves.’ People illustrate the site, in the manner of little figures scattered through architectural models. RAF Recruitment shorts and war films feed fantasies of nationhood in the post-empire era.

The MILITARY PASTORAL COMPLEX relies on the intertwining of two contradictory yet mutually supporting concepts.

GREEN WORLD AND CLOSED WORLD

The green world is one of idyll, possibility, reflection and growth.

The closed world is one of decision, instantaneity, the zero-sum game.

RAF Coltishall held both of these in balance for a long time; the instant response held within **Angleterre Profonde**. In a landscape of small villages, many current and retired staff chose to make their homes in the area, reflecting Coltishall’s status as one of the favourite postings in a career pattern of constant movement. The surprising presence of Scottish newspapers in tiny rural shops and post offices testifies to the appeal of this rural idyll to former personnel. These are dispersals of a human kind: engineers squaddies and specialists engaged in a huge industrial workplace.

The seduction of the idyll is a dangerous one in responses to military environments, but it cannot be overlooked.

In the current period of re-casting the scale and nature of the UK armed forces, it may become apparent that the RAF's connection to the idyllic countryside is all but over. With Coltishall's closure, it has lost its Eden.

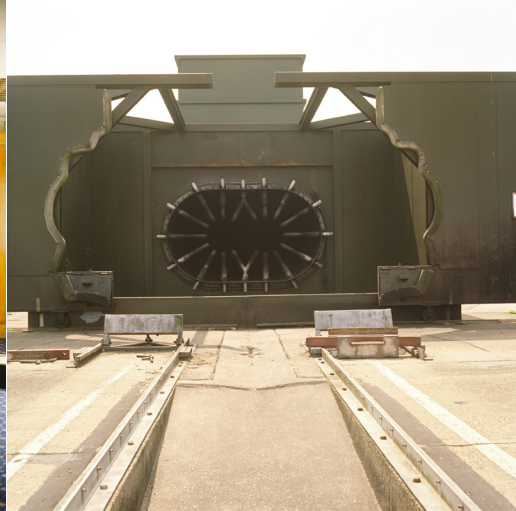
Since the closure, various speculative, temporary or makeshift uses for the site were proposed. The Long-established Norwich company Jarrolds were tipped to sell their city centre printing works and move to the largest of the hangars.

The 2008 financial crisis destroyed that option and indeed the whole of Joaarolds' printing company. Jarrolds has now retrenched around its well-liked family department store and property interests.

The site as a whole was assessed and rejected as a secure annexe to Norwich International Airport, itself built on the site of RAF Horsham St Faiths a few miles away.

In one of the more utopian proposals, modernity was reconstituted as an eco-village built on the runway and taxiways, with the grassy areas replaced with ponds and wind turbines. Words can't do justice to the paradoxes of this idea. <https://situplan.com/projects/raf-coltishall-eco-town-masterplan/>





What actually happened?

After a brief period where a riot training facility was opened in one of the largest hangars, a low-security prison was built, which renovated the 'other ranks' H-block barracks. HMP Bure is for male sexual offenders.

A 50 MW solar power array has spread across the grassy area on all sides of the runways. Swift Aircraft have taken on the lease of the technical areas and some of the hangar space. They intend to build an aerobatic trainer and test fly it from the site.

Raptor Aerospace have similarly started technical development of rocketry technologies.

Finally, a use which was rejected in the early phase of redevelopment has returned. Although the Home Office had earmarked the site as an immigration detention facility in 2007, an angry local reaction led to this being shelved.

However as of January 2021, around 40 refugees, mainly from Sudan and Syria, are being housed/detained/not detained , depending on your news source, in the Officers Mess. This is down from 90.

Complaints about conditions include the cold, inadequate accommodation, poor food and lack of communication and transport.





Coltishall is a site of dreams. The fantasies of the past and of patriotic technologies have enabled, then given way to new fantasies- of freedom through individualist flight, the power of rocketry to transform the world, the bitter dream that locking people away out of sight and out of mind can be a solution to social problems. Coltishall also offers a moment to reflect on the time before Union Jack jam lids became creepy, and how the rural and the technological combine to make a powerful mental idyll which bears little relation to reality.



